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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the primary means of integrating the library with classroom instruction is the library assignment or research paper, this paper takes a practical look at what constitutes an effective library assignment. It begins by debunking various misconceptions about the library and students' library skills which tend to undermine library assignments from the start. Some typical ineffective library assignments are then examined and improvements are suggested. These include deliberately giving students "impossible" assignments, referring an entire class to a single article without placing it on reserve, or assigning students trivial questions to answer as evidence of their library research. Finally, some ways of making library assignments an integral and stimulating part of students' undergraduate experience are suggested. Generally, it is suggested that effective library assignments are best developed using real problem-solving assignments rather than concocting artificial ones, and involving the librarian in the development--and possibly the presentation--of the assignment. (3 bibliographic notes/references) (EW)

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EFFECTIVE LIBRARY ASSIGNMENTS

by
Margaret A. Joseph and Julia K. Dabbs

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in its recent study, "College: The Undergraduate Experience in America," included students' lack of use of the library among its numerous criticisms of contemporary undergraduate education. The report, based on a three-year study of 29 colleges and universities, stated that:

> the quality of a college is measured by the resources for learning on the campus and the extent to which students become independent, self-directed learners. And yet we found that today, about one out of every four undergraduates spends no time in the library during a normal week, and 65 percent use the library four hours or less each week. The gap between the classroom and the library, reported on almost a half-century ago, still exists today.

Among the recommendations related to student library use were the following:

> The college library must be viewed as a vital part of the undergraduate experience.
>
> All undergraduates...should be given bibliographic instruction and be encouraged to spend at least as much time in the library -- using its wide range of resources -- as they spend in classes.[1]

The primary means of integrating the library with classroom instruction is the library assignment or research paper. A library assignment can take many forms, from finding a single fact to writing a long paper; but for any library assignment to be effective, and not looked upon by students as mere drudgery, careful consideration needs to be given to its design and objectives. Open communication between faculty, students, and librarians is another key to making the library assignment a positive experience for all involved. It is important to consider the significance of the library assignment, since a well-conceived and executed assignment can improve the student's ability to retrieve and critically evaluate information, skills which will be necessary to have beyond the college years. The investment in time required of the faculty member and librarian to develop such assignments should also result in the more immediate and tangible reward of improved student work. The students themselves will then realize that time spent on a well-designed library assignment can be profitable.

This paper will take a practical look at what constitutes an effective library assignment first by debunking various misconceptions concerning the library and students' library

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skills which tend to undermine library assignments from the start. Next, some typical ineffective library assignments will be examined and improvements suggested. The final section will then concentrate on ways to make library assignments an integral and stimulating part of the students' undergraduate experience.

Misconceptions About the Library and Its Resources

A LIBRARY IS A LIBRARY IS A LIBRARY

Many people assume that all libraries, like Tolstoi's happy families, are alike. In fact, most libraries must carefully tailor their purchases and services to the specific and explicitly defined needs of their constituencies. The UTSA Library does not collect heavily in areas that might be considered recreational reading or in subjects that do not clearly fit the curricular profile of UTSA. Unfortunately, students who are unaware of the collection policies of the Library, may spend several frustrating hours trying to locate information on dog grooming, the Bermuda Triangle, or windsurfing, and come to the conclusion that the UTSA Library "doesn't have any good books." If an objective of the research assignment is to learn how to use the resources of the UTSA Library, then the student will probably need some guidance, either from the faculty member or a librarian, in choosing a topic appropriate to an academic library's collections. Encouraging your students to consult a librarian, should they run into difficulties in locating materials, may seem unnecessary to some faculty; however, your encouragement can help empower the hesitant, frustrated, or uninformed student.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

This misconception involves the professor who assumes that the UTSA Library has all the same publications which he or she used while at the University of California at Berkeley, and consequently assigns the same reading list without first verifying the presence of the publications at UTSA, resulting in confused and angry students and library staff. This scenario can be readily prevented by the professor contacting the library liaison for his or her Division in advance to see if books need to be ordered, articles gathered through interlibrary loan, or other more recent works substituted for materials no longer in print.

Erroneous Assumptions About Students' Library Skills

THEY SHOULD HAVE LEARNED LIBRARY SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL

It's hard to argue with this statement, but what they should have done bears little relation to what they, in fact, did. Secondary school libraries in Texas are not especially strong (whether measured by size or by level and amount of staff).

Also, even assuming that students had some library instruction in high school, they may only have learned to use Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature and become acquainted with the Dewey Decimal system, skills which will prove to be inadequate or irrelevant now that they are using a university library. Without some kind of orientation to a large and complex library, the student's research will prove to be unnecessarily arduous and oftentimes frustrating. To remedy this, students might be encouraged to take the Library's Self-Guided Tour; or, a class session orienting students to locating information in their field might be scheduled by a librarian/professor team.

Also, do not assume that students are already familiar with common library terminology such as "index," "citation," "abstract," and "scholarly journal." Without clarification of these terms at the outset, the students' library research will seem even more puzzling and foreboding. As is true when teaching any subject, first find out what your students know and don't know about locating information in the library.

STUDENTS AS AMOEBAS

Frequently faculty seem to assume that students will "pick up" library research skills by osmosis, as they themselves may have learned how to use the library through individual exploration and trial and error. What is forgotten is that faculty are by their very nature likely to have much higher than average verbal ability, persistence, and capacity for complex logical pursuit of information than the average student. All the evidence we've seen indicates that while a few highly motivated students may make the effort to learn how to use the library on their own, the vast majority are no more likely to learn library skills without instruction than they are to learn algebra or literary interpretation unaided. At the Reference Desk, librarians can provide limited one-on-one instruction in using the library's research tools. A more efficient, thorough method of instructing large numbers of students in library research skills is a class session by a professor/librarian team covering the reference materials relevant to the assignment.

STUDENTS AS DISCRIMINATING JUDGES OF INFORMATION

Faculty, often on the cutting edge of information-gathering in their fields, use a network of news-reporting journals and contacts with colleagues that serve to keep them abreast of the latest developments. They may not realize that the information-seeking patterns of students are generally much more haphazard and amorphous. While faculty are interested in exhaustive literature searches on their subject, undergraduate students need selective sources which will prove to be of value. Unfortunately, most undergraduates are more concerned with quantity of sources rather than with quality when researching their topic. The critical evaluation of sources is one of the most important skills which can be taught by means of the library assignment. Developing the ability to evaluate materials

critically will be of invaluable assistance to the student on the road to independent, life-long learning. Librarians can supplement such assignments by providing selective, annotated bibliographies of sources most valuable to the student, or of sources which can help students gain critical insight into an author's work.

Examples of Ineffective Library Assignments

TO DREAM THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM (or, Mission Impossible)

Sometimes a professor will deliberately give a class an "impossible" assignment. That is, the students are told to locate a piece of information that the professor either knows does not exist or that he or she has no reason to believe is available in the UTSA Library. It seems that the faculty member assumes that the students will thus be forced to use their wits in the library and in the process of pursuing a will'o'the'wisp will learn various helpful things about the library. In fact, what often happens is that one or more librarians spends a lot of unproductive time working with the students running down assorted blind alleys. Again, what the student may derive from this experience is that all library research will similarly prove to be "impossible."

It is important that library assignments be designed with clear, attainable, and meaningful objectives which are apparent to the student. Also, if librarians are consulted in advance, they can assist by providing "pathfinder guides" to locating information in the relevant subject area so that students can learn how to seek information in a more logical manner.

ONE KERNAL OF KNOWLEDGE PURSUED BY 100 CROWS

On occasion, a professor will refer all three sections of a class he or she is teaching to a single periodical article without arranging for it to be placed on Reserve. In the subsequent melee, the bound volume or microfilm disappears, or the article is cut out by someone tired of waiting for a copier to become available. Keep in mind, when you mention a source in class, that a large number of students are going to try to follow up on it. Without some advance notice, it is impossible for the library to respond to the sudden mass need for one item in such a way as to insure that everyone has a chance to complete the assignment.

This scene is simple to avoid if the professor takes the brief amount of time necessary to put an article on reserve in the Library. Reference books cannot be put on Reserve; however, students might be given assignments involving a variety of reference sources, or at least using different volumes of a single source such as the Oxford English Dictionary.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT

In this case, as a means of introducing students to the library and obtaining evidence of their having actually found certain reference materials, a fill-in-the-blanks exercise is assigned where students are expected to record the color of the illustration on page 72 of the third book in the Reference Room Z section, the middle initial of the first "Smith" in Leaders in Education, and to measure the cover of the Encyclopedia Americana. The students rightly regard this exercise in futility as "busy work" and learn the lesson that library "research" is trivial, boring, and unlikely to produce anything of real value to their needs.

To make the pursuit of information non-trivial, the library assignment must be integrated with the real objectives of the class which, in turn, should be made clear to the student so that the exercise has meaning. Librarians will be happy to help you develop an assignment that will provide a valuable introduction to the reference collection for your students.

The Effective Library Assignment

From these scenarios, two recurring themes in developing effective library assignments should be apparent:

> to integrate library instruction with real problem-solving assignments rather than using artificially concocted ones presented as an end in themselves;

and

> to involve a librarian in the development of the assignment (and possibly in its presentation as well) so that the librarian can facilitate the practical accomplishment in the library of the faculty member's objectives.

The following examples of actual library assignments illustrate the successful implementation of these key points.

CASE 1--Selecting Quality Books

A professor teaching a business school class, called Policy Formulation and Administration, had always assigned an essay which constituted 35% of the course grade. Students were asked to write a 4-5 page essay based on a "quality" book about business as related to society. Each student was to select a different book, excluding technical, text, and "how to" books. The professor had found repeatedly that many students were confused by the restriction to "quality" books; consequently, he had to reject about one-third of the books they selected. He was bothered by this because he was forced to "rule" on the quality of the books chosen, and the students were not learning to define "quality" for themselves. He consulted with a reference librarian who recommended and subsequently developed an exercise

to assist the students to sort out and consider the various factors that might appropriately be considered in evaluating business literature. One class period was spent with the professor and librarian jointly leading a discussion about what constitutes quality in business literature and with the librarian presenting a list of reference books that would help the students to examine the writers' background and authority, the publishers' reputation and experience in business publishing, and reviews of the specific book selected. The librarian gave the students a list of these publications with call numbers and other specific location information to allow them to focus their time in the library on the use of the resources rather than on trying to identify and locate them. In addition to turning in the assignment sheet, students were asked to write their own definition of "quality" books.

About half of the students changed their book selection after going through the library exercise, but the business professor did not have to spend time ruling on their choices. In evaluating the finished essays, he reported that the overall quality was considerably higher than in previous years. His practice was to reject essays that did not receive a grade of A on first submission. The rejected essays were to be reworked and resubmitted. In previous semesters, he had accepted only a small percentage of the essays on first submission. This time he accepted almost twice as many. He also found he did not have to struggle, as he previously had had to do, to find 3-4 well written essays which could be read in class to serve as examples of excellence. [2]

CASE 2: Discovering Works by Contemporary Poets and Fiction Writers

Another example of classwork enhanced by the addition of a library assignment in quite different circumstances involved a creative writing class--not the type of class one usually associates with library assignments. The professor wanted her students to become familiar with the works of contemporary writers and to gain some insight into their lives and critical acceptance. She hoped that such exposure would broaden the students' understanding of contemporary writing and offer them models for their own writing. The professor, working with a librarian, developed a bibliography for the students identifying sources of biographies, bibliographies, and criticism for contemporary poets and short fiction writers. They were given complete titles as well as call numbers and other location information to allow them to concentrate their time on using the sources, rather than tracking them down. Each student was asked to submit copies of three poems or one short story by a contemporary author along with a brief biographical sketch of the author and a one-page critique of the selected poems or stories. In both the professor's and the students' judgement, the students' own writing did, in fact, benefit from the exposure to the work of publishing contemporary authors. [3]

In conclusion, librarians can insure that there are resources and services available to students in the library, but faculty provide the essential impetus for them to use its resources. Without strong encouragement from faculty, students are unlikely to take full advantage of the materials and services available. By providing challenging, realistic, and meaningful library assignments, faculty can give students a greater appreciation and perhaps even enjoyment of library research.

FOOTNOTES

1 "Prologue and Major Recommendations of Carnegie Foundation's Report on Colleges," Chronicle of Higher Education, November 5, 1986, p.21.

2 Stevens, Barbara R. and Engeldinger, Eugene A., comp., Library Instruction Within the Curriculum--the Sciences, Business and Nursing, Projects Developed for a Faculty Development Seminar. (University of Wisconsin--Eau Clair, 1984) 81-83. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 266789.

3 Eugene A. Engeldinger and Barbara R. Stevens, comp., Projects Developed for Library Instruction Within the Curriculum, (Wisconsin University, Eau Claire, 1983.) 65. ERIC Document Reproduction Service ED 244 629.